

Our Reference: PTC-276-B

PATENT

**FACTORY PERSONNEL MONITORS****CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION**

[0001] This Application is a continuation of U.S. Provisional Patent Application S.N. 60/268,982 filed February 15, 2001.

**FIELD OF THE INVENTION**

[0002] The invention relates to a system for controlling operation of equipment in response to the monitored position of individuals within a manufacturing facility and, more specifically, to a system of chips and sensors for controlling automated equipment in response to the detected proximity of an individual retaining a chip relative to a sensor positioned within the facility.

**BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION**

[0003] Many devices have been developed to prevent machine operators from being injured in the performance of jobs around automated equipment. For example, fencing can be placed around a machine to prevent an operator or another individual from moving too close to the device. Another example of a safety feature is a double button assembly. In a double button assembly, the operator is required to press two different buttons to operate the machine. The two buttons are placed spaced apart from the machine so that the operator cannot be too close to the machine while the machine is running. Another example of a safety device is a light screen. Light screens can be positioned around a machine. When the light screen is pierced, the manufacturing device can be stopped or further automatic operation can be disengaged. Generally, a shortcoming of presently known safety devices is that each device is either too easily circumvented or is extremely costly.

**SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION**

[0004] The present invention provides a system for controlling the

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operation of equipment in response to detected proximity of an individual to a location in a manufacturing facility, such as the location of a manufacturing device. The system can include chips retained by one or more individuals within the manufacturing facility and sensors positionable at any desired location in the manufacturing facility. In particular, the sensors can be positioned at a machine and can detect when an individual retaining a chip moves relatively close to the machine. The chips can be active or passive relative to the sensor and the sensor can be active or passive relative to the chips. The invention can also include control means for controlling the operation of a machine in response to a signal received from the sensor. Specifically, the control means can receive a signal from the sensor indicating that a chip has moved in relatively close proximity to a machine. The control means can disengage, stop or place the machine in a safe mode in response to the signal. A manufacturing facility can include a plurality of sensors located at various locations in the manufacturing facility. Chips can be retained by each individual in the manufacturing facility. Each chip can be uniquely configured for each individual, or for a group of individuals, or can be similarly configured for all individuals. The invention can also include data storage means for collecting data relating to the position of individuals in the manufacturing facility.

[0005] Other applications of the present invention will become apparent to those skilled in the art when the following description of the best mode contemplated for practicing the invention is read in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

#### **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

[0006] The description herein makes reference to the accompanying drawings wherein like reference numerals refer to like parts throughout the several views, and wherein:

[0007] Figure 1 is a schematic overhead view of a system according to the present invention having a passive chip and an active sensor;

[0008] Figure 2 is a schematic overhead view of a system according

to the present invention having an active chip and a passive sensor;

[0009] Figure 3 is a schematic overhead view of a manufacturing facility having a plurality of sensors, data storage means and monitoring means;

[0010] Figure 4A is a flow chart illustrating the logic applied by control means for placing an operating machine in safe mode in response to a pulse signal from a proximity sensor according to the present invention; and

[0011] Figure 4B is a flow chart illustrating the logic applied by control means for placing an operating machine in safe mode in response to a continuous signal from a proximity sensor according to the present invention.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT**

[0012] The present invention provides a system for detecting the proximity of an individual relative to a position within a manufacturing facility. The system 10 includes at least one chip 12 and at least one sensor 14. A chip 12 is retained by an individual in the manufacturing facility. The sensor 14 detects the proximity of the chip 12 with a specified range and can emit a signal in response to detection of one or more chips 12 within the specified range. By way of example and not limitation, when a chip 12, retained by an individual, is detected by a sensor 14 operably engaged, directly or indirectly, with a manufacturing device 22, the sensor 14 can emit a signal that results in the device 22 ceasing operations or entering a safe mode.

[0013] The chip 12 can be active or passive. An active chip 12b can emit an inaudible wave signal receivable by a sensor 14b over a range 16, as shown in Figure 2. As shown in Figure 1, a passive chip 12a does not emit a signal. The chip 12 can be retained by an individual in a badge, a hat, safety glasses or be maintained as a distinct item. The chip 12 can be uniquely configured, allowing a sensor 14 to detect and identify specific chips 12 when multiple chips 12 are functioning within a single manufacturing facility. For example, a chip 126 can emit an encoded, unique identification signal. The invention can be practiced with multiple chips 12

[illegible]

configured chips 12 to track movement within the manufacturing facility and to prevent access to certain areas of the manufacturing facility.

[0014]

Each of the sensors 14 can be active or passive. As shown in Figure 1, an active sensor 14a can detect the proximity of a chip 12a over a range 18. The sensor 14a can produce an inaudible wave signal having the range 18. A passive sensor 14b is shown in Figure 2. A passive sensor 14b can receive a signal emitted by the chip 12b. The sensor 14 can be positioned on a manufacturing device such as a stamping press, a lathe, or a welding machine. The sensor 14 can also be positioned adjacent to a manufacturing device if the range 16 or 18 encompasses a desired zone of safety around the manufacturing device 22b or 22a, respectively. One or more sensors 14a can be positioned on a single manufacturing device 22a to provide an array of ranges 18. The invention can also be practiced with a chip 12b operable to emit a signal having a range 16 and a sensor 14a operable to emit a signal having a range 18. In such an embodiment of the invention, the ranges 16 and 18 can be configured as desired. The ranges 16 and 18 should contemplate a desired distance between a chip 12 and a sensor 14 to ensure that a signal is emitted from the sensor 14 in adequate time to perform a subsequent function, such as the disengagement of a manufacturing device or the opening of a door. Sensors 14a or 14b can detect and distinguish between a plurality of different encoded, unique identification codes. As shown in Figure 3, a manufacturing facility can be equipped with multiple sensors 14a positioned at spaced intervals within the manufacturing facility. Sensors 14a can be positioned such that the ranges 18 of each sensor 14a are approximately tangent or overlapping with respect to an adjacent sensor 14a. Alternatively, sensors 14b can be positioned at spaced intervals such that a range 16 is detectable in the manufacturing facility by at least one sensor 14 at any time. In such embodiments of the invention, an entire manufacturing facility can be monitored, where the position of all chips 12 operating within the manufacturing facility is instantly determinable at all times. Alternatively, the invention can be practiced with

sensors 14 positioned at manufacturing devices only. Figure 3 shows a floor layout 32 of a manufacturing facility using multiple sensors 14a. A sensor 14a can be positioned on each manufacturing device 22a-g to cover a substantial area of the floor layout 32. Additional sensors 14a can be added, positioned between manufacturing devices 22a-g to cover a greater area of the floor layout 32. One or more sensors 14b can also be used to monitor the floor of a manufacturing facility also. The sensors 14a can be electrically coupled to data storage means 28c, remote from one or more of the devices 22. Data storage means 28c will be discussed in greater detail below.

[0015] As shown in Figure 1, the present invention also includes control means 20a for receiving a chip-present output signal from one or more of the sensors 14a and for controlling one or more manufacturing devices 22a in response to the chip-present output signal from one of the sensors 14a depending on the particular sensor 14a generating the output signal. The process steps are shown in simplified flow diagrams in Figure 4A and 4B. Query 36 or 36A monitors whether a chip-present output signal, or proximity signal, from one of the sensors 14 has been received. Each of the sensors 14a and 14b can individually detect the proximity of one or more chips 12. When at least one chip 12 and at least one sensor 14 jointly occupy a range 16 or 18, the corresponding sensor 14 can emit a chip-present output signal to control means 20. When the corresponding sensor 14 emits a chip-present output signal corresponding to proximity of at least one chip 12, step 38 or 38A can perform a predefined function, such as to cease continued operation of an automated device or to disengage a manufacturing device 22 from being cycled or turned on, or perform some other predefined function. Alternatively, the control means 20 can receive the chip-present output signal from one or more sensors 14 positioned at a door or a gate and control a door or a gate to open in response to at least one chip present output signal corresponding to proximity of at least one chip 12. Each sensor 14 can emit an encoded signal corresponding to the

sensed chip or chips to be sent to a remote centralized processing system or network, or to a local controller, processor or network or emit a single pulse signal corresponding to proximity or can emit a continuous signal as long as one of the chips 12 is in proximity. If the sensor 14 emits a pulse signal, as shown in Figure 4A, query 40 requires that the control means 20 receive operator input before the device 22 can be restarted. For example, disengagement of a device 22 can require maintenance personnel to restart the device 22. Step 42 restarts the device 22 after operator input. If the sensor 14 emits a continuous signal, query 44, as shown in Figure 4B, determines whether the signal is still being received by the control means 20. If the answer query 44 is yes, query 44 is repeated. If the answer to query 44 is no, the program branches to step 46 to restart the device 22.

The control means 20 can also be operable to emit an encoded signal receivable by centralized or local data storage means 28a or 28b, as shown in Figures 1 and 2 respectively. The data storage means 28 can record all occurrences of a manufacturing device 22 ceasing operations or occurrences of a gate or door being opened in the presence of one or more chips 12. The data stored by data storage means 28 can be useful in accurately determining the costs of operating a particular manufacturing device, the distribution of employees' time at specific locations in the manufacturing facility, the interaction among employees, and future planning of production and maintenance cycles.

While the invention has been described in connection with what is presently considered to be the most practical and preferred embodiment, it is to be understood that the invention is not to be limited to the disclosed embodiments but, on the contrary, is intended to cover various modifications and equivalent arrangements included within the spirit and scope of the appended claims, which scope is to be accorded the broadest interpretation so as to encompass all such modifications and equivalent structures as is permitted under the law.